Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand: The "Battle of the Axes" and the "Contest of Power"

Erik COHEN

Social Compass 1991 38: 115
DOI: 10.1177/003776891038002001

Social Compass **38(2), 1991, 115-140**

Erik COHEN

Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand: The "Battle of the Axes" and the "Contest of Power"[1]

L'auteur cherche a integrer I'etude de Vactivite missionnaire au courant dominant de la sociologie de la religion, en utilisant la distinction Eisenstadt entre les religions "axiales et non-axiales". Une analyse de Vactivite proselyte chretienne en Thailande fait apparaitre les deux strategies principals des missionnaires: la "bataille des axes" qui consiste en la confrontation directe entre I'enseignement soteriologique "axial" de deux religions mondiales que sont par exemple le christianisme et le bouddhisme; et la "contestation du pouvoir" qui comprend Vopposition des pouvoirs surnaturels lies a la religion des missionnaires aux pouvoirs mythico-magiques "pre-axiaux" des religions de la population consideree, comme le bouddhisme populaire et V animisme tribal des montagnes. L'auteur montre que les missionnaires firentpeu deprogres dans la "bataille des axes" a cause du clivage fondamental qui existe entre les composants "axiaux" du christianisme et du bouddhisme; par contre, ils avancerent davantage de jalons dans la "contestation du pouvoir" en 'attachant au composant pre-axial" du bouddhisme populaire. Ceci confirme rhypothese que le caractere "axial" d'une religion mondiale dote celle-ci d'une capacite elevee de rebondissement de ses essais de proselytisme, contrairement aux religions "non-axiales", ou que les adeptes des aspects "non-axiaux" d'une religion mondiale sont plus ouverts aux efforts des missionnaires.

Milton was Puritan so he did not believe in God very much
(From an essay by a Thai student, quoted in Enright, 1969: 28)

Buddhism is correct as far as it goes, but it leaves out the concept of God
(an Australian Protestant missionary in Bangkok)

1. Introduction

1.1 The Argument

A growing body of historical and anthropological literature amply documents the complexities of the encounter between Christianity, its churches and missionaries, and Third World societies. This literature illustrates the manifold processes of missionization (e.g. Strayer, 1976; Hvalkof and Aaby, 1981; Whiteman, 1983), its social and cultural consequences for native societies, as well as the complex and far-reaching transformation which Christian

beliefs and practices underwent in their interaction with the native religions and cultures (e.g. Frase, 1981; Hughes, 1984, 1985; Kaplan, 1986). However, while dispelling the naive view of missionary activity as a simple "conversion of the heathens" to Christianity, this literature is still analytically weak in some crucial respects. In particular, it fails to distinguish clearly between the changes introduced into Christianity by the missionaries in order to bring it closer to the native people or to make it more comprehensible and palatable to them, and its assimilation to native beliefs and practices perpetrated by the native converts to Christianity themselves in disregard of missionary teachings. Secondly, these studies do not distinguish theoretically between different strategies of missionary activity — I.e. between alternative approaches to the native religions and cultures and the various methods of presentation of Christian beliefs and practices that were chosen to penetrate the natives' "construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) and to induce them to convert to Christianity. Thirdly, these studies have not paid sufficient attention to the impact of the differences between the native religions and cultures on the nature and success of the missionary effort. They have particularly disregarded the very different missionary situation that prevailed when Christianity faced the great non-Christian, here to be called "axial", religions (following Jaspers, 1949; Eisenstadt, 1982, 1986) such as Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism, and the so-called "primitive" or "pre-axial" religions of Africa, South America and of the Asian tribal societies. The first of these points is to be taken up in a separate publication (Cohen, in preparation).

Here I concentrate specifically on the last two points. The strategies employed by Christian missionaries when they are faced with a complex religious situation, such as that in Thailand, where "axial" and "pre-axial" religious elements coexist, or are even closely associated, in native religions. I deal with two major strategies, to be called the "battle of the axes" and the "contest of power . The former refers to the encounter of Christianity with Theravada Buddhism in its philosophical or theological version; the latter, to its encounter with the magical world of spirits permeating tribal religion and popular Buddhism (Tambiah, 1970; Terwiel, 1975, 1976). I show how the missionaries, on the whole, failed in the "battle of the axes", i.e. in the direct encounter between Christian and Theravada Buddhist theology. By using the alternative approach, conceived of as a "contest of power" between the power of God or of Jesus Christ and the native spirits, however, they had a better chance of success. Consequently, the closer that potential converts are to philosophical Buddhism, such as Buddhist intellectuals and learned monks, the less is their responsiveness to the Christian message. Similarly, the closer they are to "animism", such as northern Thai folk-Buddhists (Tambiah, 1970; Terwiel, 1975, 1976; Mulder, 1977) or hill tribe people (e.g. Chindarsi, 1976; Anderson, 1978; Alting von Geusau, 1983), the greater is the success of the missionary endeavour — however transformed Christianity may become in the process. These findings lend support to the general hypothesis, first proposed by Eisenstadt, that "axial" civilizations are much more resilient to the penetration by foreign cultures than "non-axial" ones; it follows that what I call the "battle of the axes" will be the fiercest

and most intense form of intercultural encounter. I now elaborate the theoretical underpinnings of this argument.

1.2 Theoretical Background

"Primitive" or "pre-axial" religious communities are more easily penetrated by the missionary impact of an "axial" religion than are "axial religious communities. Primitive religions are ill-equipped to withstand such an external onslaught because, although rich in detailed beliefs and practices and often also implicitly profound, they do not generally develop an explicit and congruent theological system, and do not engage reflectively in an intellectual or theological contest of wits with representatives of other religions. Hence they are often easily overpowered by simple, practical arguments of conquerors or missionaries, whose very palpable physical power may in itself be an important consideration in the acceptance of their theological claims. Christians (and, for that matter, Muslims) have therefore found It relatively easy "to convert the heathens".

The matter is completely different when members of one great "axial" religion, e.g. Christianity, encounter those of another, e.g. Buddhism. Each of these religions possesses its own complex theology and soteriology; moreover, each is based on the underlying assumption that the mundane world is essentially imperfect and in some sense bad or evil, and that salvation consists of the achievement of a state of religious and moral perfection which transcends this world — although the various great religions differ considerably in their soteriological ideal, i.e. their conception of that state and of the means towards its realization (cf. Eisenstadt, 1982).

This soteriological ideal plays a crucial role in the "social structuring of reality" and in the emerging world-view of the societies based on an "axial" religion, and informs their fundamental presuppositions and their institutional arrangements. These in turn provide powerful "plausibility structures" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 174 ff) which protect their members from external influences based on different presuppositions, and hence endow the societies and their cultures with a characteristic resilience.

The "axial" character of the "axial" religion is, of course, most salient at the centres of these societies (Shils, 1975), where the protectors of its purity and of "true beliefs" are located. It is this circumstance that in the past often induced Christian missionaries (particularly Jesuits) to engage upon a frontal "battle of the axes" by trying to convert to Christianity the socio-political centre of a society professing an "axial" religion: for, although sure to encounter the fiercest opposition there, this strategy also promised the greatest pay-off — if the centre were to yield, it would be easy to convert the rest of society.

When this effort failed, however, an opposite strategy could be implemented. No religious community is uniformly "axial". Further away from the centre, magical, animistic and other "pre-axial" beliefs and practices can be found among nominal adherents of any "axial" religion (cf. Thomas, 1971; Christian, 1972). An alternative approach hence offers itself to the missionaries: namely to promulgate their message through the periphery of

the society, the groups which are weakest and most remote from the centre, whose syncretistic beliefs and practices come close to those of "primitive religion, and who can hence be overcome in a "contest of power". Although incremental and with little prospect of spectacular success, this strategy could be used because of its greater practicality.

1.3 Socio-historical Background

Christianity was on the whole spectacularly unsuccessful in penetrating Thailand (e.g. Lantern, 1986) despite prolonged and intensive missionary efforts by both Catholics and Protestants. The Catholics arrived first in the seventeenth century; French Jesuits attained considerable influence at the court of Ayutthya and even attempted to convert King Narai, but failed; they lost their position and influence in the xenophobic revolution of 1688 (Thompson, 1967: 646 ff; Wyatt, 1984: 113-17). This early failure to convert the Thais through converting the centre led to a stagnation of Christianity in Thailand for 150 years. The Protestants arrived in the nineteenth century ~ first the American Presbyterians (1828) and then a host of other denominations (McFarland, 1928). They found a tolerant atmosphere and, at a certain stage, even hoped to convert King Mongkut (Rama IV, reigned 1851-68) to Christianity (Thompson, 1967: 660), in view of his lively interest in Western culture and science (Griswold, 1962). Their efforts, however, bore no fruit. While the Thais eagerly accepted the missionaries' contributions to the "modernization" of Thailand — such as the introduction of the press (Winship, 1986), of modern medicine (Thompson, 1967:658-9) and of education (Vella, 1955: 360-1) — neither the king nor other members of the elite accepted Christianity (Thompson, 1967: 661). Enthusiastic Presbyterian missionaries moved into the periphery and established themselves in the northern principality of Chiang Mai (McGilvary, 1912; McFarland, 1928; Swanson, 1984). After an incident with the ruling prince in which two converted local Christians were martyred, and also after the proclamation under King Chulalcngkorn of the "Edict of Toleration" (Swanson, 1984: 28-9), the Protestant missionaries in the north enjoyed greater success than those in Bangkok, although even there the number of converts remained limited (Swanson, 1984: passim). In general, a greater proportion of converts was made in Thailand from among the Chinese (Blanford, [1976]: 39) and, later, among the hill tribes, than from among Thai Theravada Buddhists.

Although limited in scope, Thai Protestantism became independently institutionalized. An autonomous Thai Protestant Church, the Church of Christ in Thailand was formed in 1934, incorporating the Presbyterians, the Disciples of Christ, the Baptists and some smaller denominations. After the communist take-over in China, the Overseas Missionary Fraternity (OMF) moved to Thailand and became highly active in the central and northern regions, while the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) developed considerable activity in the north-eastern region of the country (Isan). An Evangelical Fellowship was established, affiliating some of the more fundamentalist Protestant sects. In recent years several Pentecostal churches were founded by local preachers, mainly in Bangkok. Altogether there are

presently more than fifty Protestant denominations and missions active in Thailand; however, despite this, Protestantism remains a marginal phenomenon in Thai society, with less than **100,000** adherents in a population of over fifty million people. Moreover, it is most widely disseminated in the social and geographical periphery of the country. Despite intense efforts, the relative failure of the Protestant missionaries in Thailand engendered considerable heart-searching; their reflections produced new and interesting theological ideas, and particularly a theology of the "contest of power", discussed later.

The Catholics are a bigger community than the Protestants, numbering more than **200,000** members; many of these, however, are of Vietnamese and Chinese origin, whose ancestors were already Catholics on their arrival in Thailand (cf. Ansuchote, **1960: 6).** The Catholic Church does not at present engage in active proselytization and limits itself primarily to humanitarian and ed cational activities. Recently, however, following the decisions of the Second Vatican Council, the Catholics attempted to engage in a "dialogue" with the Buddhists, an enterprise which, as we see later, kindled anew the fires of the "battle of the axes".

1.4 Methods

This paper is based on three kinds of data collected during a three-month period in Thailand in **1986:** an exhaustive survey of the literature on Christianity in Thailand and of some unpublished archival material; extended interviews and conversations with informants and representatives of Christian churches in Thailand; and observations of some religious events. While the general aim of the study was to examine the different ways in which Christianity and local religions interacted, both historically and at the present time, one of its principal focuses soon became the theological differences between Christianity and Thai Buddhism, and the strategies employed by missionaries and representatives of Christian churches to deal with and overcome these differences. The study thus continues, and in some ways expands, the work of Hughes **(1982, 1984, 1985).** However, **I** did not undertake a systematic survey of any particular group of Christians, nor an in-depth study of any specific Christian denomination in Thailand.

2. The Strategy of the Battle of the Axes

2.1 Basic Presuppositions of Buddhism and Christianity

There are hardly any two "axial" religions more distant in their basic presuppositions and the foundations of their world-views than Buddhism and Christianity, and particularly Theravada Buddhism and Protestant Christianity. Their presuppositions inform two completely dissimilar *Lebensformen* (Wittgenstein, **1967:226;** Gier, **1980)** which determine the respective contexts within which the religious and moral beliefs of each religion obtain their distinct meaning. **I** briefly outline first the principal

opposing presuppositions to elucidate the divergent starting points of the "battle of the axes" and the formidable obstacles facing the missionaries in their attempts to get their message through. I start with the Theravada Buddhist world-view. Although this world-view is explicitly adopted by only a few philosophically orientated intellectuals and monks, it has a profound influence on the outlook, interests and practices of ordinary Thai Buddhists in their daily lives, and thus stands in the way of their conversion to Christianity. Furthermore, in Thai folk religion, the Buddhist presuppositions are intimately intertwined with magical and "animistic ideas; however, I leave these out of the present discussion and take them up in the next section, in which I deal with the strategy of the "contest of power".

Theravada Buddhism is founded on an essentially cyclical conception of the world, the most salient feature of which, for present purposes, is the concept of *samsara*, the chain of birth and rebirth, which Buddhism inherited from Brahmanism and made into the basic presupposition on which its soteriological teachings are anchored. The place of the individual in the world is determined by his *karma* (Thai *kam*), the balance of the merits and demerits *{not* sins) (Thai *bun* and *bap)* accumulated in previous lives; he can influence his future lives by acquiring merit and desisting from demerit and thus be born again into a higher level of existence, but he cannot escape the chain of rebirths by the acquisition of merit alone. Buddhist soteriology, however, provides a path of escape from the chain of rebirths, consisting essentially of the extinction of his desires by the individual, the achievement of enlightenment about the true nature of the world, and the eventual attainment of a state of bliss called *nirvana* (Thai *nipari),* the literal cessation or annihilation of individual existence. Buddhism is based on the presupposition of the utter transitoriness of all existence (including that of the gods). It is radically anti-essentialist in its philosophical outlook, denying the existence of any ultimate permanent entities in the world.

However, although Thai Buddhism recognizes *nirvana* as the theoretically highest religous goal, the very emphasis placed on the exalted nature of that goal made it practically unattainable for ordinary contemporary individuals. Indeed, there exists a widespread conviction in Thailand that only a handful, if any, individuals have obtained *nirvana* since Buddha's time. The rank-and-file Thai Buddhist may even be afraid of the idea of non-being and of cessation of existence, and feel more comfortable with the pursuit, through the acquisition of merit, of a better life in his present or future existences. The quest for merit is, indeed, the principal religious goal pursued by the great majority of Thai Buddhists, and merit-making is the principal religious practice (e.g. Hanks, 1962). Indeed, the basic presupposition which underlies this merit-making activity informs the world-view of the majority of Thai Buddhists, and guides their practical conduct in virtually every sphere of life.

This presupposition is that *karma* acts as an impersonal, lawful mechanism, akin to the law of physical causation, which blindly apportions the individual's state in life and his fortunes according to the balance of his past merits and demerits. The universe is not permeated by a divine will, but is essentially neutral and impersonal. In sharp contrast to Christianity, there is no personal, loving God. Merit and, ultimately, salvation can be achieved only

by the individual's own efforts. The Thai Buddhist world-view is based on the principle of reciprocity and exchange: its basic maxim is: "Do good, receive good; do evil, receive evil". You cannot receive anything for nothing — there exists no free gift of love. While this is essentially a cosmological presupposition, it has an important bearing upon interpersonal relations, which are typically conceived and conducted in terms of an exchange model.

This world-view has several important implications for our theme. First, in a world based on the cycle of births and rebirths there are no fateful situations, events or acts: the individual can always repair in a future life the bad deeds committed in a previous one. Second, the universe being impersonal and neutral, there exists no concept of fundamental evil or hence of "sin" in the Judeo-Christian sense. Third, the combination of the first two points leads to the conclusion that there exists no concept of "guilt", again in the Judeo-Christian sense; demerit *(bap)* leads to pragmatically bad consequences and hence should be avoided, but the individual is ultimately responsible only to himself and hence is neither "sinful" nor "guilty" when acting demeritoriously (although he may be "ashamed" before others). Fourth, demerits of previous acts are irrevocable; like sums on a balance-sheet they can be counterbalanced by meritorious acts, but cannot be erased; there is no concept of *forgiveness* in the Christian sense, since there is nobody in the universe who could forgive. Hence man's salvation depends ultimately on himself and his actions; in sharp contrast to Christianity there is no place in this world-view for divine grace. Finally, a most crucial implication follows from the non-essentialist position of Buddhism: man has no eternal soul. Indeed, the realization of this fact *(annata)* is an essential precondition for the achievement of ultimate salvation.

This view of the world contrasts sharply with that of Christianity, and particularly with the world-view of the Protestant churches, such as the Presbyterian, Baptist and other evangelistic churches, which conducted missionary activities in Thailand.

Christianity is founded upon an eminently historical conception of the world, according to which man, although created in God's image, committed the primaeval sin, and is therefore born sinful; the most salient feature of the Christian world-view is the unique event of God becoming incarnate in Jesus Christ, who died for the redemption of all mankind. The historicity of the Christian world-view is reflected on the personal level in the presupposition — which contrasts so sharply with that of Buddhism — that man is given only a single, temporal life, in which the fate of his eternal soul is determined. Moreover, although man's will and conduct can influence his chances of salvation, his salvation is ultimately in God's hands, and depends on His grace; unlike in Buddhism, man cannot save himself merely by his own efforts.

The Protestant Christian world-view, as briefly outlined here in contrast to the Buddhist, has several important implications for our theme: first, human life is dramatic and man's actions are fateful because his eternal fate is determined during the single, temporal span of his worldly existence. Second, the world having been created by a personal divinity, God, to whom

man is responsible, there emerges the concept of fundamental evil and specifically of "sin in the sense of an act contrary to God's will and commandments. Third, sinful man is "guilty", in a state of disgrace before God. Fourth, sin and the accompanying guilt cannot be fully absolved by meritorious deeds but only by God's grace. Yet, in sharp contrast to Buddhism, sin can be erased by God's forgiveness and hence does not necessarily leave any permanent mark on man's eternal soul. Grace, however, is an act of pure love on God's part and not a mere consequence of man's actions. Hence, finally, man's salvation is ultimately in the hands of God: man cannot save himself (as in Buddhism), but depends utterly for his salvation on God's love and grace. "Love" is thus the fundamental "cultural code" of Christianity; it is paradigmatically represented in the God-man relationship but is also supposed to inform relationships on the human level. In contrast, the basic cultural code of Buddhism is "exchange"; it is paradigmatically represented in the relationship between the individual and the impersonal universe, ruled by the law of *karma*, but it also influences human relationships.

These, then, are the contrary presuppositional starting points of the "battle of the axes", seen from a philosophical or theological perspective. They form the general context within which the Christian approach to Buddhism in Thailand is examined here. Several issues can be distinguished in this regard: (1) the *obstacles* faced by missionaries and other representatives of the Christian churches in their efforts to disseminate the Christian message in Buddhist Thailand; (2) the general *strategies* employed by them to overcome or circumvent these obstacles; and (3) the specific *tactics* developed for successful communication of their message. Owing to the scope of these issues and the considerable amount of pertinent material to be presented, only the first two are discussed here. The specific tactics employed, although highly intriguing, are not of direct relevance to our principal theme and are taken up in another context.[3]

2.2 Obstacles to the Dissemination of Christianity

The direct confrontation of Christianity with Buddhism, not only in its philosophical but also in its practical *karmic* version, encountered in Thailand serious obstacles, which are reflected in the missionary literature and in conversations with missionaries and other representatives of the Christian churches. These obstacles derive not so much from some abstract Buddhist theological convictions, but rather from the manner in which the basic presuppositions of Buddhism, outlined above, shape the world-view and the dominant practical concerns of Thai Buddhists. Missionaries have repeatedly pointed out that "... the Thai mind and heart are filled with a host of ideas and attitudes that render the Gospel either incomprehensible or irrelevant" (Cooke, 1978: 1). In a world which is controlled by the impersonal law of *karma*, and in which the over-reaching concern of the individual is to improve his standing by the achievement of merit, the basic Christian concepts of sin, guilt, condemnation, grace and forgiveness have little meaning (ibid.). Indeed, in the Thai *Lebensform* no language game can be

played with the Christian concepts of "sin" and "guilt", since there is no-one in the transmundane sphere to play with. These terms may make sense to a Thai on the interhuman level, but do not make sense beyond it; hence: ". . . if you indulge in solitary vice, you are not sinning against anyone else — not even God, because there is no such being" (ibid.: 3—4); it follows that "... the Thai Buddhist incurs guilt only in one dimension — toward man — for he has no God" (ibid.: 7). With Buddhist demerit *(bap)* a different language game has to be played than with Christian sin — it has to be *counterbalanced* by merit but cannot be forgiven by grace: it is a mechanical exchange game with an impersonal universe, not one based on God's free gift of love.

This basic Thai exchange-orientation to the world has important implications for the general attitude of the Thai Buddhist to the religious sphere. First, for any religious belief or practice to be of interest, there has to be something in it" for the believer. If Christian beliefs or practices are offered for their intrinsic value, they are of little attraction, since no palpable benefit *(prayot)* accrues from them to the individual. Second, Buddhism predisposes the Thai to a radical pragmatic rationalism. Hence, he is loath to accept by an act of faith any religious dogmas which he does not understand, such as the Christian concept of the Triune nature of God. Third, this very pragmatism predisposes the Thai against any kind of religious exclusiveness; while he is frequently willing to try out any new religious (and magic) beliefs and practices and adopt them "if they work" for him, he shows little understanding for the Christian demand of exclusive acceptance and adherence, and for the abandonment of cherished non-Christian beliefs and practices. Thai Buddhism is intrinsically syncretistic (e.g. Kirsch, 1967; Terwiel, 1975); Christianity is fiercely monopolistic.

While these cultural obstacles to Christianity, embedded in the Thai world-view, are formidable enough, they are accompanied by some others, political and social in nature, which are in different ways further derivatives of that world-view.

The emergent Thai nationalism embraced Buddhism as an integral component of the modern Thai national identity. This is illustrated in the slogan "nation, religion, and monarchy" *(chat, satsana, phramahakasat)* (Wyatt, 1984: 229), as well as in the often quoted statement that "To be Thai is to be Buddhist"; Ishii (1968: 865), for example, claims that in Thailand " 'Being a Thai' and 'being a Buddhist are almost synonymous". Buddhism, indeed, is the basis on which the Thai "civic religion" (Reynolds, 1977) is founded. As Thai national consciousness has grown in the course of the twentieth century and has penetrated the broader rural strata of Thai society, a double-edged obstacle to the dissemination of Christianity has emerged. On the one hand, Thais are now loyal to Buddhism not only for religious but also for nationalist reasons; to adopt Christianity (or, for that matter, any other religion) would for many come close to political disloyalty or to a loss of national identity. On the other hand, Christianity has historically been identified in Thailand as a foreign, specifically Western religion; it was brought and promulgated by Western missionaries, and its introduction was accompanied by the dissemination of Western ideas and practices which,

however eagerly embraced by the Thais for their practical value, have nevertheless posed a threat to the traditional Thai cultural, and later national, identity. Indeed, some of the contemporary opposition to Christianity, while phrased in Buddhist religious terms, appears to be primarily based on nationalist rather than purely religious motives. Christian missionaries are aware of this problem, and presently seek to dissociate Christianization from Westernization — an issue which is taken up in another context (Cohen, in preparation).

Finally, there exist some important social obstacles to the dissemination of Christianity. Thai society has generally been tolerant towards Christianity within broad margins, the government was and remains on the whole benevolent towards Christian missionaries, and even the Buddhist religious authorities have shown little opposition to the efforts of Christian missionaries to convert the Buddhists — often owing to a very "axial" conviction that the missionaries will fail anyway, because Buddhism is the "truth". Still, the relative failure of the intensive Christian missionary efforts was not due merely to the Buddhist convictions and attitudes of individual Thais. Rather, it is closely related to the permanent Thai preoccupation with the interpersonal level of relationships; for, while Theravada Buddhism encourages the development of a particular brand of Thai individualism (cf. ten Brummelhuis, 1984), it also unintentionally engenders a tendency for a continuous competition and jockeying for position between individuals in a stiffly hierarchical social structure. This competitiveness, however, is covert, and masked by a pervasive concern with "appropriate" and decorous deportment and a constant preoccupation with the preservation of "face" (Ho, 1976), which encourages outward conformity, whatever one's "real" inner convictions and aspirations may be. As some missionaries have also realized (e.g. Cooke, 1978: 3-9), the Thai is a "shame" rather than a "guilt" culture. In such a culture It is unsafe to "stick out one's neck" by, for example, adopting another religion, even if it is personally appealing. Pervasive changes can take place only collectively, not individually, as long as social controls, effective through the mechanism of shame, are intact. In the relatively more coherent rural communities of the northern and north-eastern regions of Thailand, missionaries therefore found the social pressure too strong to make it feasible to convert individual villagers; either whole groups, such as communities or kinship clusters, were converted or nobody at all was. However, where the intensity of social controls is lower as it is, for example, among dispersed homesteading farmers in the central plains, individual conversions have been achieved more easily. The easiest to convert are therefore social outcasts, such as lepers, in particular. Indeed, at present individuals who are socially relatively isolated or emancipated, such as rural-to-urban migrants and students in the big cities, are most amenable to missionary endeavours. This can be seen from the relative success in recent years of the various Pentecostal churches, such as the recently established Hope of Bangkok Church, to attract large crowds from the socially uprooted strata of Thai society.

2.3 The Theological Dynamics of the "Battle of the Axes"

The "battle of the axes" between Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand went from a full-scale Christian attack at the early stages, through more localized skirmishes and various attempts at avoidance and silent infiltration, to a quest for a ceasefire and even negotiations. However, the battle flared up recently in an unexpected Buddhist counterattack against Catholicism, precisely when the latter seems to have sought peaceful coexistence. The significant historical changes of strategy by Christian missionaries derived partly from changes in the official theology and the global policy of the Christian churches themselves, and partly from the exigencies of the local situation faced by the missionaries. There were also major differences in approach between the Christian churches: first of all, between Catholicism and Protestantism, and secondly, also between different Protestant denominations and sects themselves. Finally, significant differences emerged between foreign and Thai missionaries and church leaders. It is impossible within the scope of this paper to treat exhaustively all these variations in approach; hence only some of the crucial stages and differences are discussed.

In the early stages of missionary activity, the missionaries were both convinced of the absoluteness and exclusiveness of their message and ignorant of the religion and customs of the people whom they had sought to convert. Hence, they rejected those wholly and indiscriminately; indeed, they made practically no distinction between Buddhism, Thai spirit cults, and the animism of the hill tribes, equally stigmatizing the gods and spirits as demons and the images of Buddha as idols. The homage and propitiation of all of these were simply labelled as "devil worship".

Thus, for the Protestant missionaries in Siam in the mid-nineteenth century ". . . the northern states [in contemporary Burma, Thailand and Laos] were not only a land of darkness but also ruled by Satan. The religion of the people was held to be a counterfeit religion which could not save. Indeed, the missionaries saw traditional religion (Buddhist and animist) as part of the surreal gloom haunting the land" (Swanson, 1984:40). The people were told unequivocally that their beliefs and practices will condemn them eternally to hell.

The flavour of the single-minded zeal with which the early missionaries approached the Thais is illustrated by an anecdote told by Prince Damrong, the younger brother of King Chulalongkorn and the principal force behind the king's programmes of reform. Damrong relates how, as a boy, he approached a missionary conversing with a small crowd in the precincts of the Grand Palace in Bangkok:

> **I do not remember the actual words which were spoken, but the conversation was to the following effect:**
>
> **Said the missionary, "Do you not know that your religion [i.e. Buddhism] is wrong, and can only lead you to hell?"**
>
> **Some members of the crowd, probably disgusted at such a question, moved away. Others laughed, and asked, "What have we to do to avoid hell?"**
>
> **The missionary, "You must venerate Jehova and follow the teaching of Jesus Christ". "And what is the teaching of Jesus Christ?"**
>
> **That was the desired question, and out came the books and pamphlets which the**

missionary handed to his interrogator. "These will tell you", he said, "if you follow the teaching, you will go to heaven" (Damrong, 1928: 3).

Local custom was indiscriminately rejected by the missionaries. Even the use of the Thai language in Christian worship was forbidden as "pagan". The missionaries found it easy to condemn Buddhism as pagan idol-worship, not only because in syncretistic folk Buddhism Buddha is indeed worshipped as if he were a divine being, but also because they were apparently ignorant of the true nature of the teachings of philosophical Buddhism. Early nineteenth-century Western Orientalists still tended to identify Buddha as a god, even if they were divided on the nature of his divinity (Almond, 1986: 305-9). Some extreme fundamentalist preachers in Thailand, indeed, continue to preach to this day that the worship of Buddha images will land the believer in hell. Most contemporary missionaries, even of Protestant sects, however, tend to avoid such a direct condemnation of Buddhism out of theological as well as tactical considerations.

The adamant and uncompromising stand of the early missionaries coupled with the plethora of obstacles to the communication of their message, did not help to make converts among a bewildered, mistrustful or equanimous population (e.g. Chaiwan, 1975: 18; Lantern, 1986). Their failure induced them later on to make alterations in their strategies and tactics. But this initially exclusivist and irreconcilable approach of the missionaries to Thai religion and culture is a useful point of reference against which the more recent alterations in their approach can be highlighted.

As they became more closely acquainted with the local situation, the missionaries began to distinguish between Buddhism and animism. Instead of the earlier wholesale condemnation of local culture and religion, they now became more discriminating. They continued to condemn animism and what they considered to be the various idolatric and superstitious accretions to Buddhism, while praising the pure, philosophical Buddhism, as well as the precepts of Buddhist morality. The latter have often been superficially compared to the Ten Commandments, the vastly different context notwithstanding. The better understanding of Buddhism by the foreign missionaries made them realize that it cannot be simply labelled as "paganism", if only because philosophical Buddhism is ultimately atheistic. Missionaries of the established Christian churches thus desisted from a wholesale rejection of Buddhist teachings and began to examine in some detail the similarities and differences between the two religions (e.g. Eakin, 1960; Thirty-three Points, 1962; Seely, 1968/9; Bradley, 1970; Smith, n.d.). However, although this examination made the confrontation between Christianity and Buddhism more subtle, it also made it more difficult. As they realized the profundity of the Buddhist message, the missionaries also grasped both the apparent similarities as well as the theological cleavage between the two religions; it was easier to conduct the Christian battle against Buddhism as long as its "axial" nature was not wholly realized. Moreover, the atheistic and anti-essentialist position of philosophical Buddhism which denies the existence of both a supreme deity and an eternal soul, made the search for a common theological ground with Christianity much more difficult than it is, for

example, in the case of Judaism or Islam. "Enlightened" Protestant missionaries found themselves in a "double bind": while sympathizing with much of Buddhist teaching and respecting the person of Gautama Buddha, they also realized the complete disjunction of the fundamental presuppositions of the two religions (cf. Smith, n.d.: 24-8; Petchsongkram, n.d.: 102 ff.). This is neatly illustrated by the statement of a missionary in an interview in Bangkok, quoted at the beginning of this article: "Buddhism is correct so far as it goes, but it leaves out the concept of God" (compare this with the statement of Enright's Thai student regarding Milton's Puritanism, which inadvertently formulates the basic philosophical doctrine of Buddhism).

As far as I can ascertain the mainstream Protestant churches, such as the Church of Christ in Thailand, never formulated an explicit and consistent stance towards Buddhism, a "Protestant theology of Buddhism", of the kind which began to emerge in Catholicism after the Second Vatican Council (see later). An extended dialogue between Protestantism and Buddhism on the theological level did indeed take place, particularly in the series of Thompson lectures at the present Payap University in Chiang Mai (e.g. Eakin, 1960; Morgan, 1966). These lectures, however, never exceeded a learned comparison between the two religions by both Christian and Buddhist theologians, and have not facilitated the formulation of a clear theological position on part of the Protestants.

Rather than seeking a common ground to bridge the gulf between the two religions, or to exacerbate the direct confrontation between them, recent Protestant strategy was one of avoidance. Modern missionaries sought to keep Protestantism and Buddhism mutually "out of range". They concentrated on disseminating the "good tidings" of the Christian message but refrained from publicly condemning or criticizing Buddhism. They often expressed their respect for Buddha as a man, but emphasized that he was not a god — a position which agrees totally with that of philosophical Buddhism; but Buddha has no standing in Protestant theology. The Buddhist monkhood on its part remained, on the whole, unconcerned with the Protestants and their proselytizing efforts, which in any case bore only modest fruit until recently.

The comparison of the Catholic with this Protestant strategy leads to some ironic conclusions. Until the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church did not develop a specific theology of Buddhism; nor did it wish in recent times to enter into open disputation with it. Catholicism in Thailand was, on the whole, less eager than the Protestant Church to convert the Thais, and in recent years stopped all active proselytization. At the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church formulated a new approach to non-Christian religions, modifying considerably its earlier claim to be the unique and exclusive bearer of salvational truth through God's revelation and sacrifice in Jesus Christ. Rather, a more complex doctrine was formulated, according to which other religions can be assumed to embody grains of salvationd truth, through God's partial revelation to their founders; but only in Christianity did that revelation become complete (cf. Declaration, 1966, particularly pp. III-160-1). Other religions could then be conceived, theologically, as embodying the Christian truth to differing degrees of

clarity, forming what some members of the clergy in Thailand called "stepping stones" towards the full revelation of the salvational truth in Christianity. Within this new theological framework, Buddhism was also recognized as containing some grains of truth. Some Catholic thinkers in Thailand eventually formulated the idea that, just as Judaism preceded Christianity in the West, so Buddhism preceded it in the East. According to this logic, Buddha came to be viewed as a kind of prophet, a predecessor of Jesus Christ.

Members of the Catholic clergy in Thailand, particularly foreign priests of long standing in the country, consequently made a serious effort to reconcile the two religions to the greatest possible degree. Participation of Catholics and Buddhists in each others' rituals was encouraged. When interviewed, one Jesuit priest went so far as to agree that one can be comcomitantly a Christian and a Buddhist; a Catholic nun argued in favour of Christians participating in Buddhist meditational exercises — without, however, reaching the highest stages, in which one has "to deny everything". But even those Catholics who keenly sought a *rapprochement* with Buddhism remained aware of the impossibility of a complete reconciliation, owing to the unbridgeable gulf that exists between the basic presuppositions of the two religions. Paradoxically, moreover, a conflict between them began to develop precisely as a consequence of the Catholic attempt to achieve even this limited *rapprochement.*

In the early 1980s, the Catholic Church in Thailand, which heretofore coexisted side by side with Buddhism without much theological exchange or friction, initiated, in accordance with the decree of the Second Vatican Council on the Church's missionary activity (cf. Decret, 1966:111-238-9) and the instructions of the recently formed Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions, a "dialogue" with Buddhism, in which some leading Buddhist monks were invited to take part.

This initiative for holding a dialogue and, even more, the idea that Buddha can be seen as a prophet — with the implication that his was an incomplete message awaiting its completion by the coming of Jesus Christ — provoked a fierce reaction on the part of a militant Buddhist group calling itself the "Group of the Defendants of Security of Buddhism"; that group saw in the new Catholic approach nothing but an attempt to subvert Buddhism (Sobhon-Ganabhorn, 1984; Catholic Plot, 1986). Specifically, the group objected to (1) "the statement that Buddha is a mere prophet of god ; (2) "the statement that all the teachings of Buddha were imparted partially to him by god, whereas the whole and complete ones were given to Jesus Christ", a statement which was implicitly intended ". . . to deny the fact that the Buddha was fully self-enlightened"; and (3) various ways in which the Catholics had allegedly misused and distorted the Dhainma and thus "trampled" upon it, as in the statement that "Nirvana in Buddhism means heaven" and that Buddhism did "no longer exist after B.E. [Buddhist Era] 500 and this era belongs to Phra Sri Aryamettrai or Jesus Christ [i.e. that the Catholics identified Jesus Christ with the Future Buddha, Maitreya]" (Sobhon-Ganabhorn, 1984: 4-5). The Catholics were further accused of changing their strategy from a direct attack upon Buddhism, as in the past,

to the more insidious strategy of "dialogue", with the ulterior motive to subvert Buddhism (Catholic Plot, 1986: 1-4); accordingly, it was claimed that ". . . the dialogue is a strategy to carry out the plans of the Catholic Church to assimilate Buddhism" (ibid.: 4). Evidence for these claims was allegedly to be found in the secret "Bulletin" of the Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions in the Vatican, which is amply quoted in one of the Group's publications (ibid.).

The Catholics, protesting that their effort at dialogue was misunderstood, toned down their programme, which is at present conducted only on a modest level and in a discreet manner, if at all. The apparent liberalization of the Catholic outlook, and its opening up towards other religions, thus backfired in Thailand, provoking a rare outbreak of militancy from among the ranks of the otherwise tolerant Buddhist monkhood. It is not for me to determine whether the controversy was engendered by a misunderstanding of the idea of "dialogue", as the representatives of the Catholic Church claimed in my interviews, or whether indeed this apparently liberal idea was ultimately intended, or at least logically implied the intentioin, to show to the Buddhists that their own salvational message was perfected in that of Jesus Christ — and thus to convince them to accept Christianity. Be that as it might, it is ironical but instructive that the "battle of the axes" was rejoined, in a militant manner, by the Buddhists, precisely at a time when it appeared that the heretofore most exclusivist Christian church, Catholicism, eventually became tolerant towards other religions and presumed to take seriously their soteriological messages.

3. The Strategy of the "Contest of Power"

3.1 The Animist Background

While Christianity and Buddhism are worlds apart on the level of their basic "axial" presuppositions, they are much closer and easier to reconcile at the level of "pre-axial" beliefs and practices. It follows that the closer a Thai is to philosophical Buddhism, the more difficult will it be to convert him to Christianity. This supposition has, indeed, been unanimously confirmed by Protestant missionaries in my interviews. On the contrary, the stronger the "pre-axial" component is in folk religion, the easier it appears to be to convert its adherents. The missionaries" in fact, succeeded better among Chinese Mahayana Buddhists in Thailand than among adherents of Theravada (cf. Blanford, [1976]). They were relatively more successful among those adherents of Theravada whose religious beliefs and practices contain a strong animistic element, as is the case, in particular, among northern Thai peasantry (Terwiel, 1975; Mulder, 1977) than among proponents of a more philosophical Buddhism, whom they had to recognize as practically unconvertible. Finally, the missionaries were most successful among the "animist" hill tribes whose religions are utterly "pre-axial". I argue in the following that the relative successes of the missionaries were due to the fact that they employed a strategy of "contest of power" when approaching folk

Buddhists and the hill tribe people; i.e. a strategy which is formulated on the "pre-axial" level itself, and thus attacks and overpowers those elements in the religion of the people which are most crucial to their daily existence and concerns — rather than its basic "axial" presuppositions.

H.G.Q. Wales has already commented that The lower one goes in the social scale in Siam . . . the more one finds that superstitions and the belief in the existence of spirits who require propitiation come to the fore at the expense of the established religion" (Wales, 1931: 300). It should be noted, however, that animistic beliefs are not a mere accretion to some pure Buddhism, but that the two are closely intertwined in folk religion in a virtually indissoluble syncretism, so that although "the religion of the farmer is basically animistic" (Terwiel, 1975: 4) nevertheless "virtually *every* Thai, no matter how animistic he may be, will identify himself as Buddhist (Kirsch, 1967:23). The obverse of this state of affairs is that the basic symbols of Buddhism became permeated by animism: "For many people, the Buddha and images of him have power similar to that of the spirits" (Hughes, 1984:315).

While the particular ethnographic details of Thai animism are not of direct relevance here (but see e.g. Tambiah, 1970; Salayakanond, 1973) it is important to point out that these animistic beliefs are formulated, and have been analysed by anthropologists, in the idiom of "power" (Mulder, 1977; Hughes, 1984). This analysis appears to be particularly appropriate for northern Thailand, where the environment of the Thai farmer — and even more that of the hill tribesman — appears to be densely populated by a host of spirits *iphii),* differing in their particular nature, character and attitude to man, but all of whom have to be unceasingly worshipped, appeased and propitiated to protect oneself from danger and disaster and to ensure oneself of prosperity and luck. Most spirits are not inherently evil; however, they are whimsical, erratic powers which may become malevolent on the slightest pretext. The individual is thus permanently in fear of their unforseeable malfeasances, which can find expression in illness, crop-failure and other disasters.

The power of the spirits is, thus, not the all-encompassing but orderly sway of the law of *karma*; rather it is a chaotic, unpredictable power of beings which constitute part of the natural environment, as seen by the Thai farmer (or hill tribesman). In Hughes' (1984: 323) formulation: "there are two cosmologies in Thai culture which can be used to explain events. The first sees the cosmos as morally ordered according to the law of karma . . . The second sees the universe as an arena of competing a-moral powers with unpredictable results. The best course of action IS to align oneself with the highest power with which one will be accepted."

In worshipping the spirits one does not seek merit; rather one takes a more concrete, give-and-take attitude to them. Their propitiation falls into the realm of magic, not of religion proper: "The appeal to spirits and magic is *ad hoc*. They are approached anew in each situation" (Hughes, 1984: 323). Rather than a long-term and indefinite exchange with the universe (such as is implied in merit-seeking), the propitiation of spirits takes the form of a discrete deal, in which a concrete sacrifice is exchanged for a concrete

benefit. If merit-seeking comes close to "social exchange" in Blau's (1967:88-114) terminology, spirit-worship comes closer to his "economic exchange" (p. 94). Nothing could, then, be further from the spirit of Christianity, which, as we have pointed out earlier, is based on the fundamental category of "love" as unilateral giving; love in Blau's scheme constitutes the very opposite of "economic exchange" (1967: 76-85). And yet, Christianity, and more particularly the Protestant missionaries, were more successful in dealing with this type of magical folk-religion than they were in their attempts to overcome, or even to come to terms with, philosophical Buddhism. However, their relative success was achieved not by any theological effort to convince these "pre-axial" worshippers of spirits of the soteriological superiority of "axial" Christianity; but rather in a concrete and straightforward contest of power" in which the greater efficaciousness of Christianity to deal with the powers which threaten the daily existence of the farmer and the hill tribesman was demonstrated to the latters' satisfaction. The course in which this contest of power was turned from an expedient into a theological strategy is the principal theme of this chapter.

3.2 The Emergent Theology of the "Contest of Power"

In contrast to the "battle of the axes", the theology of the "contest of power" did not arrive in Thailand as a ready-made and established missionary approach. Rather, it emerged gradually upon the modern missionaries' reflections about their experiences among syncretistic Thai Buddhists and "animistic" hill tribes in northern Thailand. At the outset it was nothing more, apparently, than a convenient tactic, a device to be used in converting the local people to Christianity, but it only recently began to be developed into a full-blown theological strategy. Only the bare outlines of this process are presented here.

As I pointed out earlier, the early missionaries saw northern Thailand as a land of darkness, ruled by Satan, to which they felt called upon to bring the true light of Christianity (Swanson, 1984: 39-40). They did not distinguish between Buddhists and animists, but condemned both equally as devil-worshippers. Thus they believed that those [Thai Christians] who reverted to Buddhism had been recaptured by Satan" (ibid.: 40). In view of the syncretistic character of northern Thai Buddhism and the missionaries' ignorance of the people's religion, it is indeed difficult to imagine that they could have seen the situation differently.

The ordinary rural and tribal people did not have and still do not have an explicit and unified system of beliefs. Mischung's (1980: 55) statement concerning a Sgaw Karen village probably also applies to many northern Thai Buddhists: "Karen religion is not a closed conceptual system. There are no 'native philosophers' who try to combine the scattered pieces into an integrated whole." Under such conditions, the Christian message, couched in theological or soteriological terms, must have made little, if any, sense to the people. Indeed, although individual northern Buddhists accepted Christianity for different motives and under varying circumstances, it appears that among the principal reasons were the superior ability of the missionaries to

heal illness, and the protection which the new religion appeared to afford against the threatening and annoying spirits, the appeasement of whom has been both expensive and time-consuming. It was thus the people, rather than the missionaries, who first saw Christianity in terms of a power contest with the malevolent forces lurking in their environment.

The knowledge and practice of modern medicine were the principal factors which spread the influence and enhanced the status of the missionaries in northern Thailand: "The early missionaries and their medical skills were accepted and believed by the tribal man in the jungle to be from magic power. The tall, blond, white missionaries appeared as healers, protectors, and givers . . . They called their missionaries *Mosasana* (i.e. *Moh Sat Sana)* (which means [in Thai] Religious Doctor), according to their religious tradition" (Kim 1980:51). Swanson, in his history of the church in northern Thailand, emphasizes throughout the importance of medicine as a factor in the conversion of the local Buddhists, so much so that "Since medicine was one of the primary tools of missionary evangelism and people converted because of it, when mission medicine was no longer available to Christians the gravitational pullback to traditional ways became all the more difficult to resist" (Swanson, 1984: 132). Indeed, periods of epidemics seem to have been the favourite time at which people turned to Christianity. Thus, during the malaria and smallpox epidemic in northern Thailand, conversions to Christianity mushroomed" (ibid.: 139) as people put themselves under the protection of the power of Christianity.

Missionaries frequently argue that their efforts to convert the northern Thais, and especially the hill tribes, had a salutary, liberating effect on these people, whose lives had previously been dominated by the fear of spirits and the oppressive need to propitiate them constantly. While this may be a somewhat idealized representation of the missionary impact, at least one independent anthropological observer appears to concur with the missionaries. We have it on the authority of Kunstadter that:

> **The difficulty of coping with the omnipresent spirits has caused Karens to accept other faiths. . . . Feeding the ancestral spirits which cause illness when hungry or neglected is essential to good health. To escape the onerous obligation, many [Karens] in the Mae Sarieng hills have adopted a complex ritual. . . that supposedly confuses the spirits and gets rid of their demands. Other Karens have become Christians . . . (Kundstadter, 1972: 278).**

And Mischung, after examining four cases of conversion to Christianity among a group of Karens, found that "In each case, the reason had been purely opportunistic: cheaper and simpler rituals, material aid by the missionaries as well as access to higher education" (Mischung, 1980: 143).

The ability of Christianity to supplant the spirits and their worship, however, was in the native mind based on the premise that its power is superior to that of the spirits (Hughes, 1984: 327-8), as could be concluded, for example, from the superior healing power of the missionaries' medicine. Jesus Christ was perceived, and even presented by the missionaries, as the "Great Spirit"; like Buddha, Jesus too was assimilated to animism.

While this was undoubtedly a useful expedient facilitating conversion, the

question emerges of how the missionaries themselves related to the spirit world of the northern Thai peasants and hill tribesmen.

The development of the Christian theology of Thai folk-religion is difficult to reconstruct. The early nineteenth-century missionaries, raised on a fundamentalist reading of the Bible, tended to identify the spirits of northern Thai folk-religion with Satan's demonic powers (cf. Swanson, 1984: 39-40). They apparently took demon possession literally and believed in the power of Christian prayer to exorcise demons. Thus, McKean reports of the early days of the Chiang Mai mission:

> **Demon possession was common and the victims often found relief in Christian prayer and medicine. One Christian woman found the vigorous application of her Christian hymnal on the head of her crazed sister exorcised the demon and restored the reason of her possessed relative. The possessed woman declared that the devil was chasing her as she ran screaming up and down the rice field, angry with her because she had decided to become a Christian (McKean 1928: 124).**

A later generation of missionaries, raised in the rationalist spirit of twentieth-century Protestant theology, apparently found it harder to come to terms with native beliefs in spirits, and tended to discard them as "superstitions". This emerges from interviews with some of the contemporary missionaries, who were either vague about the existence of spirits or stated expressly that, having been raised in the rationalist tenor of modern Protestant theology, they did not upon their arrival in Thailand believe in the existence of spirits. One missionary indeed related how he wrangled for about ten years with the problem of the existence of spirits, whose pervasive presence was so strongly felt by the villagers in the province of Nakhon Pathom, in central Thailand, to whom he ministered. He has, however, eventually become convinced of their existence (cf. Cohen, forthcoming); he claimed that during his stay in the village he obtained "as much evidence of [the existence] of spirits as I have of God". Nevertheless, he is still unsure of their precise theological standing — namely whether they are or are not "devils";[5] therefore he calls them simply "evil spirits". His belief in the existence of spirits was confirmed when he moved from Nakhon Pathom to the city of Chiang Mai in the north and realized that the belief in spirits was common among his missionary colleagues there. He related some personal encounters with spirits in northern Thailand; among other things, he told of a woman possessed by a spirit which he himself exorcized by invoking the name of Jesus Christ;[6] consequently, the woman was converted and "received Jesus in her heart".

Exorcism is a prime example of the contest between the power of Christ and that of the spirits. That the missionaries themselves tend to think in general terms of such a contest is attested by one of the principles of church growth, developed in an "Evangelism-in-Depth" (EID) programme (Conklin, 1977) and formulated as follows: "When multi-individual conversions result [from the EID programme], a 'power encounter' should occur in the life of the seeker in which he turns his back on the old religion and accepts the new Way in Christ" (1977: 234).

However, while such ideas tend to be widespread among Protestant

missionaries in northern Thailand, an explicit theology of the contest of power was most fully developed by Edward Hudspith, a Baptist missionary who worked among the Karen for about thirty years, and who is presently formulating it in a book on the "functional theology of life". In an interview, Hudspith criticized previous missionaries who told the Karen (in the rationalist vein of the times) that "the spirit world is purely psychological" and that consequently the converted Karen should just "forget about the spirits and believe in Jesus Christ". Contrary to this approach, Hudspith takes the existence of the spirits seriously; he considers them to be devils and relates a number of instances in which he personally engaged in power encounters with them. On the basis of these experiences, he draws the general conclusion that "there needs to be a battle of power at every level" between Jesus and the spirits, and that it is necessary to find Christian "functional substitutes" for the spirit world of the Karen. Moreover, once the Karen are converted, they should be made to conduct a "farewell ceremony" to the spirits whom they have abandoned, so that these will finally be appeased and will stop bothering the converts; otherwise, the newly converted Christians will continue to live in a permanent dread of the unappeased spirits. His major theological effort relates to the need to "rethink theology in regard to the "spirit world".

Although his principal concern is with the Karen, who profess an "animistic" religion, Hudspith is convinced that the northern Thais, though nominally Buddhists, are also basically animists and in need of outside (i7e. Christian) assistance, like the Karen (against their oppressive domination by the spirit world). Only the more orthodox Buddhists should be approached differently — they should be taught about forgiveness (i.e. love) in Christianity, which is missing in Buddhism. Hudspith thus makes a clear distinction between the "pre-axial" strategy of "contest of power", for which he developed his own theology, and that of the "battle of the axes", each of which is conducted on a different level and with regard to diverse categories of potential converts.

4. Conclusions

In this article an attempt has been made to relate the study of proselytizing missionary activity to some of the principal issues in the contemporary sociology of religion. Two basic types of strategy for such activity were conceptualized and empirically documented from the study of Christian missionary work in Thailand. Each type of strategy relates to one of the two analytically distinguishable, but empirically often intertwined, components of world religions: the one to their philosophically and theologically explicit and comprehensive "axial" soteriological teachings; the other to their "pre-axial mythological and magical beliefs and practices, touching the daily life of the adherents (these frequently coexist with the "axial" component in syncretistic folk religion). The two basic types of strategy are:

1. The "*battle of the axes"* which involves the direct confrontation between the principal beliefs and soteriological teachings of two "axial" world religions — in our case, Christianity and Theravada Buddhism. This strategy

is typically directed towards the cultural and political centres of the target society, with the goal of converting its members from the top downwards. It is a difficult strategy but one which promises, if successful, considerable gains for the proselytizing religion.

2. The *"contest of power"* which involves the opposition of the supernatural powers claimed by the missionaries' religion and wielded by them, to the "pre-axial", mythico-magical powers of the religion of the target population — in our case, syncretistic folk Buddhism, as well as hill tribe animism". This strategy is typically directed towards the margins of society, where the "pre-axial" elements are generally stronger than they are in the target society's centre. It is an incremental strategy, not very spectacular, but more practical than the preceding one.

While Christianity on the whole failed to convert the Thais, it was particularly unsuccessful in its early attacks on the central polity, and in the implementation of the strategy of the "battle of the axes" in general. It was more successful in its attempts to convert marginal groups of Thai society, such as northern Thai peasants and particularly hill tribes, using the strategy of the "contest of power". This finding confirms the hypothesis that "axial religions, or more exactly the adherents of the "axial" component of world religions, are more resilient to attempts at proselytization than are "pre-axial" religions, or better the adherents of the "pre-axial" component of world religions, to be successful, however, the missionaries have to reach these "pre-axial" believers on their own level — i.e. in terms of the strategy of the contest of power". This, in turn, raises new theological problems, particularly that of interpretation of the strategy of "contest of power" in terms of the official "axial" theology. We have seen an example of exactly such an effort in the endeavours of E. Hudspith.

It was demonstrated that the failure of the Christian missionaries in the "battle of the axes" is related not merely to the specific theological differences between Christianity and Buddhism but also — and in my opinion to a decisive extent — to the influence of the divergent basic presuppositions of the two religions on the world-views and social attitudes and relations characteristic of the members of the respective civilizations based on them. This raises an important question: do such presuppositions continue to influence even the beliefs of the converts to the new religion — for example, that of the Thai Buddhists who converted to Christianity? The answer in the available literature is positive — as can be seen, particularly, from Hughes' (1984,1985) work — even if his interpretation of the data differs from the one implied here. In particular, Thai Christians continue to approach religion in terms of a quest for "merit", i.e. according to an exchange model, and have little comprehension for the Christian precepts of forgiveness or grace, based on the principle of God's unilateral love (Hughes, 1984: 325-7).

The analysis presented in this article raised some fascinating problems for further study. Most directly related to the preceding discussion of missionary strategies is the problem of change in the Christian churches as they become integrated in the Thai socio-cultural context. One should distinguish in this regard between two processes: that of Christianization of Thai customs on the one hand, and the countervailing process of Thaification of Christianity on

the other. Contemporary missionaries, reflecting on the relative failure of Christianity, developed various ways and tactics to present the Christian message in a manner more acceptable to the Thai people — a manner which would take account of their Cultural and religious background and selectively incorporate elements from that background into Christianity, thereby reducing the image of Christianity as a foreign Western religion. While such attempts are made, as it were, from the top down, spontaneous processes of Thaification of Christianity can be discerned on the level of the rank-and-file converts and long-time adherents of the religion, who put pressure from the bottom upwards on the churches and their leadership to adapt more readily and fully to the cultural context in which they are located (cf., e.g., Hughes, 1984). This problem is to be taken up in a separate publication (Cohen, in preparation).

A related question is how did the various Christian churches and denominations differ with regard to their preferred missionary strategies and tactics of proselytization, as well as in the degree of their accommodation to the Thai environment. Of particular interest for a closer integration of the study of missionary activities into the mainstream sociology of religion is the question of how various types of Christian religious organizations, especially "churches" and "sects", differ in this respect! To my mind, a useful theoretical approach to this problem could be developed on the basis of an expanded Troeltschean "church-sect" typology (Troeltsch, 1961): it could be hypothesized that churches (and denominations) would be more adaptable to the Thai (or for that matter any other non-Christian) environment than would sects, which, seeking separation from the world, will be more prone to condemn that environment. This hypothesis should, however, be modified in terms of the distinct type of "responses to the world" (Wilson, 1973: 18-26) characteristic of every particular sect.

Finally, a major comparative problem is indicated by our analysis: we have seen that the basic presuppositions of Christianity and Buddhism are diametrically opposed. While this state of affairs appears to create perfect conditions for an extremely fierce "battle of the axes , the very gulf between the basic presuppositions appears to make it more difficult for the contestants to join the battle. The question may hence be asked, what is the nature of the "battle of the axes" when conducted between "axial" religions based on presuppositions which are less radically contrasting than those of Christianity and Buddhism? Does it flare up more or less violently when the attacked religion defends its uniqueness in the face of deceptive similarities rather than fundamental differences? Such questions appear to provide useful points of departure for a systematic sociological study of the confrontation between the major world religions.

NOTES

[1] The material for this paper was collected during the summer of 1986 within the framework of my wider study on "Social Change in Thailand" under a grant from the Harry . Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace at the Hebrew

University of Jerusalem, whose support is hereby gratefully acknowledged. Thanks are also due to the National Research Council of Thailand, the Thailand Information Center at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, and to the Manuscript Division of Payap University in Chiang Mai, for their kind assistance, and to E. Zehner and G. Fuldham, who kindly shared with me information collected in the course of their studies of Christian communities in Thailand.

[2] For an analysis of other aspects of Christianity in Thailand covered by the study see Cohen, forthcoming and in preparation.

[3]- This issue will be taken up in Cohen, in preparation.

[4]- Kim must be confusing the "tribal men" with northern Thai peasants — since he refers in the quoted paragraph to their language as "northern Thai".

[5] His equivocation reflects the prevailing lack of decision and clarity with respect to the precise nature and standing of demons in Christian theology (cf. Rahner, 1972:21).

[6] In this he followed closely the formula used by the apostle Paul in exorcising a demon from a woman: "I charge thee in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her" (Acts, 16: 17).

REFERENCES

Almond, Ph. C., 1986, "The Buddha in the West; from Myth to History", *Religion* 16: 305-22.

Alting von Geusau, L., 1983, "Dialectics of Akhazan: The Interiorization of a Perennial Minority Group", in J. McKinnon and . Bhruksasri (eds) *Highlanders of Thailand*, pp. 243-77, Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press.

Anderson, K.E., 1978, "Elements of Pwo Karen Buddhism", *Lampang Reports*, Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies, Special Publication No. 5: 269-74.

Ansuchote, Ch., 1960, "The Vietnamese Refugees in Thailand: A Case Study in Decision Making , unpublished MA thesis, Thommasat University, Bangkok.

Berger, T.L. and T. Luckmann, 1966, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Harmonds worth, Penguin.

Blanford, C.E., [1976], *Chinese Churches in Thailand*, Bangkok, Suriyaban Publishers.

Blau, P., 1967, *Exchange and Power in Social Life*, New York, Wiley.

Bradley, W.L., 1970, "What a Christian Has Learned from the Buddhists", in *In Memoriam Phya Anuman Rajadhon*, pp. 359-69, Bangkok, Siam Society.

Catholic Plot, 1986, *The Catholic Plot Against Buddhism*, Bangkok, Group of the Defenders of Security of Buddhism.

Chaiwan, ., 1975, *The Christian Approach to Buddhists in Thailand*, Bangkok, Suriyaban Publishers.

Chindarsi, N., 1976, *The Religion of the Hmong Njua*, Siam Society, Bangkok.

Christian, W.A., 1972, *Person and God in a Spanish Valley*, New York and London, Seminar Press.

Cohen, E., 1990, "The Missionary as Stranger", *Review of Religious Research* 31(4): 337-50.

Cohen, E., (in preparation), "Christianization of Thai Culture and Thaification of Christianity: The Interaction between Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand .

Conklin, J.E., 1977, "Fishing in Deep Waters Among Karens in Thailand", in R.E. Hedlund (ed.) *Church Growth in the Third World*, pp. 228-43, Bombay, Gospel Literature Service.

Cooke, J.R., 1978, "The Gospel for Thai Ears", mimeo, Manuscript Division, Payap University, Chiang Mai.

Damrong, Prince, 1928, "Introductory Remarks", in G.B. McFarland (ed.), pp. 1-15.
Declaration, 1966, "Declaration sur les relations de PEglise avec les religions non-chretiennes", in *Les acts du Concile Vatican* //, pp. 111-159-66, Paris, Les Editions du Cerf.
Decret, 1966, "Decret sur l'activite missionaire de PEglise", in *Les Actes du Concile Vatican* //, pp. 111-215-88, Paris, Les Editions du Cerf.
Eakin, 1960, *Buddhism and the Christian Approach to Buddhists in Thailand*, Bangkok, Ruang Rat ana,
Eisenstadt, S.N., 1982, "The Axial Age", *Archives Europeennes de Sociologie* 23(2): 294-314.
Eisenstadt, S.N., ed., 1986, *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations*, New York, SUNY Press.
Enright, D.J., 1969, "Thai Personalities", *Encounter* 32(2): 27-32.
Frase, R.G., 1981, "The Subversion of Missionary Intentions by Cultural Values: The Brazilian Case", *Review of Religious Research* 23(2): 180-204.
Gier, N.F., 1980, "Wittgenstein and Forms of Life", *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 10: 241—58.
Griswold, A., 1962, *King Mongkut of Siam*, New York, Asia Society.
Hanks, L., 1962, "Merit and Power in the Thai Social Order , *American Anthropologist* 65: 1247-61.
Ho, D.Y.-f. 1976, "On the Concept of Face", *American Journal of Sociology* 81(4): 867-84.
Hughes, P.J., 1982, "Incarnation and the Communication of the Gospel in Thailand", in H.K. Swanson (ed.) *To What Extent? Incarnation in the Thai Context*, pp. 24-33, Chiang Mai, Payap College, Manuscript Division, Publication No. 3.
Hughes, P.J., 1984, "The Assimilation of Christianity in Thai Culture", *Religion* 14(4): 313-36.
Hughes, P.J., 1985, "Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand", *Journal of the Siam Society* 73(1/2): 23-41.
Hvalkof, . and P. Aaby, eds, 1981, *Is God an American? An Anthropological Perspective on the Missionary Work of the Summer Institute of Linguistics*, Copenhagen, International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) and London, Survival International.
Ishii, Y., 1968, "Church and State in Thailand", *Asian Survey* 8(4): 864-71.
Jaspers, K., 1949, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*, Munich, Piper.
Kaplan, ., 1986 , "The Africanization of Missionary Christianity: History and Typology", *Journal of Religion in Africa* 16.
Kim, .I , 1980, *The Unfinished Mission in Thailand*, Seoul, East-West Center for Mission Research and Development.
Kirsch, A. Th., 1967, "Phu Thai Religious Syncretism: A Case Study of Thai Religion and Society", PhD dissertation, Harvard University.
Kunstadter, P. 1972, "Spirits of Change Capture the Karens", *National Geographic* 141(2): 267-84.
Lantern, z., 1986, "The Missionaries: Why Have They Failed So Miserably?", *Bangkok Post* 25(5): 13.
McFarland, G.B., ed., 1928, *Historical Sketch of Protestant Missions in Siam 1828-1928*, Bangkok, Bangkok Times Press.
McGilvary, D. 1912, *A Half Century among the Siamese and the Lao*, New York, Fleming H. Revell.
McKean, J.W., 1928, "The Narrative of Chiengmai Station", in G.B. McFarland (ed.), pp. 113-28.

Mischung, R., 1980, "Religion in a CGAW (SGAW) Karen Village of Western Upland Chiang Mai Province", unpublished research report to the National Research Council of Thailand.
Morgan, B.P., 1966, *Thai Buddhism and American Protestantism,* Chiang Mai, Thailand Theological Seminary.
Mulder, N., 1977, "The Moral and the Powerful; A Note on the Thai Animistic Worldview", *The Journal of Humanities* 7(2): 71-83.
Petchsongkram, n.d., *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree; Some Observations on the Christian Faith in Thailand,* Bangkok, Thai Gospel Press.
Rahner, K., 1972, "Damonologie", *Herders Theologisches Taschenlexikon,* Vol. 2, pp. 21-2, Freiburg, Herder.
Reynolds, F.E., 1977, "Civic Religion and National Community in Thailand", Journal of Asian Studies 36(2): 267-81.
Salayakanond, ., 1973, "Spiritualism; Long Before Buddhism", *The Nation* 26 August.
Seely, F.M., 1968/9, "Thai Buddhism in the Christian Faith", *Southeast Asian Journal of Theology* 10(2/3): 132-40.
Shils, E., 1975, "Center and Periphery" in E. Shils, *Center and Periphery: Essays in Macrosociology,* pp. 3-16, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press.
Smith, A.G., n.d., The Gospel Facing Buddhist Culture", *Asian Perspectives* No. 27.
Sobhon-Ganabhorn, Ven. Phra, 1984, *A Plot to Undermine Buddhism,* Bangkok, Siva Phorn.
Strayer, R., 1976, "Mission History in Africa: New Perspectives on an Encounter", *African Studies Review* 19: 1-15.
Swanson, H.R., 1984, *Khrischak Muang Nua; A Study in Northern Thai Church History,* Bangkok, Chuan Printing Press.
Tambiah, S.J.,1970, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-east Thailand,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
ten Brummelhuis, 1984, "Abundance and Avoidance: An Interpretation of Thai Individualism", in H. ten Brummelhuis and J.H. Kemp (eds) *Strategies and Structures in Thai Society,* pp. 39-54, Amsterdam, Publicatieserie Vakgroep Zuid- en Zuidoost Azie No. 31, Antropologisch-Soziologisch Centrum, University of Amersterdam.
Terwiel, B.J., 1975, *Monks and Magic; an Analysis of Religious Ceremonies in Thailand,* London, Curzon Press.
Terwiel, B J., 1976, "A Model for the Study of Thai Buddhism", *Journal of Asian Studies* 35: 391-403.
Thirty-Three Points, 1962, *Thirty-Three Points; Buddhist and Christian Teachings,* Bangkok, The Church of Christ in Thailand, Office of Christian Education and Literature.
Thomas, K., 1971, *Religion and the Decline of Magic,* Harmondsworth, Penguin.
Thompson, v., 1967, *Thailand; the New Siam,* New York, Paragon Book Reprint.
Troeltsch, E., 1961, "Church and Sect", in T. Parsons, E. Shils, K.D. Naegele and J.R. Pitts (eds) *Theories of Society,* pp. 664-70, New York, The Free Press of Glencoe.
Vella, W.F., 1955, *The Impact of the West on Government in Thailand,* Berkeley, University of California Press.
Wales, H.G.Q., 1931, *Siamese State Ceremonies,* London, Bernard Quaritch.
Whiteman, *D.L.,* ed., 1983, *Missionaries, Anthropologists and Culture Change, Studies in Third World Societies* No. 25.
Wilson, B.R., 1973, *Magic and the Millennium,* London, Heinemann.
Winship, M., 1986, "Early Thai Printing: The Beginning to 1851", *Crossroads* 3(1): 45-61.

Wittgenstein, L., 1967, *Philosophical Investigations,* Oxford, Basil Blackwell.
Wyatt, D.K., 1984, *Thailand: A Short History,* Bangkok, Thai Watana Panich.

Erik COHEN, PhD, is Professor of Sociology and Social Anthropology at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He has conducted research in Israel (kibbutzim, new towns, ethnic groups), Peru (urban anthropology) and Thailand (tourism, urban anthropology, social change). His principal research interests at present are social change, the relationship between sociology and philosophy, and the sociology and anthropology of tourism. He has published numerous articles and is joint editor, with M. Lissak and . Almagor, of *Comparative Social Dynamics,* Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1985, and the author of Expatriate Communities, *Current Sociology* 24(3), 1977. ADDRESS: Dean, Faculty of Social Sciences, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Mount Scopus, Jerusalem 91905, Israel.